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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS MHP LEADER BAHCELI

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Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Three points stood out during Ambassador's April 24 discussion with Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Chairman Devlet Bahceli. First, Bahceli is clearly still concerned about the image the US holds of the MHP, going out of his way to portray the party as mainstream and moderate. Second, the MHP is cautiously optimistic about relations with the US, wanting a more concrete understanding of what the Turkish-US "strategic partnership" entails. Finally, and surprisingly, Bahceli opened up on the issue of the Armenian diaspora, practically challenging President Obama to recognize the genocide. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador paid a courtesy call visit to MHP Chairman Devlet Bahceli at the party headquarters building on April 24. This was Ambassador's first tete-a-tete with Bahceli, though they had met twice previously, once in the context of President Obama's visit to Ankara. In attendance were Party Secretary General Cihan Pacaci and Istanbul MP Ambassador Deniz Bolukbasi.

¶3. (C) Ambassador congratulated Bahceli on his party's success in the March nation-wide local elections. He expressed US support for Turkey's democratic system and reinforced President Obama's message of support for Turkish EU membership. Ambassador praised MHP's support for both of these goals, both as junior partner in the reform-minded coalition government of 1999-2002, and as an active and constructive opposition party in Parliament.

¶4. (C) Bahceli emphasized the MHP's role as a constructive, nonconfrontational player in the political system. And lamented that the media has not been kind to it. He thanked the Ambassador for his praise and noted that many of the economic reforms that the MHP had undertaken while in government have acted as bulwarks against the current global financial crisis. He was careful to point out that though the MHP is a nationalist party, it is not racist; the nationalism it espouses is one of bringing the people of Turkey together, not of driving them apart. In evaluating MHP's success in local elections, he noted that the MHP deliberately pulled its punches in the largely Kurdish Southeast, for fear of sparking conflict: "We will never let tension prevail, even if it causes us to lose elections." He argued that a hostile media and "certain think tanks" have given the US administration an incorrect understanding of the MHP, which is detrimental to Turkish-US relations.

15. (C) Bahceli went to great lengths to praise the history of Turkish-US friendship, noting that despite a number of "sensitive points" the relationship is strong and important. He touched upon some of the uncertainty that MHP (and a large sector of Turkish society) feels about the relationship in calling for a stronger definition of what it is that constitutes the "strategic partnership" Turkey and the US enjoy. He asserted that both sides need to be honest and open with each other in order to optimize their interests in a balanced manner. In this way mutual confidence will build and carry the countries past their sensitivities.

16. (C) This wider discussion served as an entree for Bahceli to address the issue of US political debate concerning the Armenian genocide issue. In strong, emotional, but not angry terms, Bahceli said that the US and Turkey were on a mutually-detrimental cycle, in which the months leading up to the April 24 Day of Remembrance fuel debate over whether it will be this year that the US president will utter the word "genocide." According to him, this foments an atmosphere of anti-Americanism, particularly among the youngest generation of voters who have experienced this political tension every year of their lives. "Whatever the US is going to say, let it be said now," pleaded Bahceli, rather than let the issue continue to be a festering sore in Turkish-American relations.

17. (C) Comment: Bahceli's message underscores fundamental assumptions by the Turkish polity as a whole. Bahceli has made it his career goal to transform the MHP from the thuggish band of nationalist brutes it was in the 1970s into a disciplined, respectable member of the political system. He has largely succeeded in this goal, but this conversation and others we have had at lower levels of the party once

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again emphasize that the MHP is still sensitive about its public image. Bahceli's comments on Turkish-US relations come from a perspective that, despite his praise, "strategic partnership" does not live up to its name from the Turkish perspective. Many Turks perceive a double standard by which strategic partnerships with Britain, Israel, Japan, and Australia are codified and work flawlessly but their own is intentionally defined in vague terms and fraught with difficulty. His challenge to the US to finally put the Armenian genocide issue to rest reflects a wide perception that genocide is being used as a political tool: a large swathe of Turkish society believes that the US intends eventually to declare the events of 1915 to constitute genocide, but maintains the fiction of debate as leverage in negotiations with the Turkish government. Bahceli's challenge is also undeniably self-serving; the MHP stands to benefit most at the polls from the emotional reaction that a US recognition of an Armenian genocide would bring. He would lead the charge to trash relations with the US were we to use the term "genocide." He has been trying to make political hay, claiming the President's use of "Meds Yeghern" equates to "genocide" ever since the President's Armenian Remembrance Day message. End comment.

18. (C) Leadership note: Devlet Bahceli is an incredibly soft-spoken man in private conversation, so much so that he often is speaking in a whisper. He is also not a natural politician, often coming across as awkward, unfocused, or confused. On heartfelt issues, such as the Armenian genocide issue in this meeting, he can be impressive, however. At such times, he conjures up his voice -- literally speaking from his core -- and speaks eloquently, fluidly, and with deep emotion. End note.

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Jeffrey